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The trouble with *Civilization*

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What follows is an exploration of meaning, information and pleasure in *Sid Meier's Civilization III*. Various theorists, including Poblocki (2002) and Douglas (2002) have argued that games within the *Civilization* series¹ perpetrate a reductive folk-history that positions Western-style technologically orientated progress as 'the only logical development' for humanity (Poblocki 2002: 168). Such critiques are warranted, but they share a tendency to focus on the game's rules and pseudo-historical guise, at the expense of its more playful, less quantifiable aspects. The intention here is not to redeem *Civilization* or save it from its critics. The point is, rather, to examine aspects of the criticism that has calcified around the series to date, and question some of the conclusions that have been drawn.

Given the complexity and volume of information in this game, and the fact that games are played, and re-played, it would be quixotic to pursue a single, definitive account of the meaning of *Civ III*. One analysis might focus on the game's rules, conditions and goals in order to show that it embeds a pro-Western stance. Alternatively, an interpretation could draw on evidence relating to the playing of the game by different users. The meaning of the game could be discussed in terms of its relationship to earlier fantasies of imperial conquest and Western self-reinvention in the space of the 'other'. These approaches might be classified as focusing on, in turn, rules, play and culture. These categories are borrowed from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* (2004). According to this useful book, rules involve the 'intrinsic mathematical structures of games' (2004: 102). For the sake of this discussion, this would be broadened to include the multiple modes and address of the game-as-text. Their second schema or conceptual framework is 'play' – the experience through which the potentials of the game-text are actualised, the 'player's interaction with the game and with other players' (2004: 102). Salen and Zimmerman's third schema is that of culture, the contexts of play in a wider sense. This frame involves looking past 'the internal, intrinsic qualities of games toward the qualities brought to the game from external contexts' (2004: 104). Salen and Zimmerman stress that these categories are inter-related and that the borders between them are permeable.

So a credible investigation into the meaning of *Civ III* could be staged at the level of rules, or play, or culture. Any of these strategies could result in a valid, if partial, analysis. The point at which such an exercise in interpretation might fracture is where the discussion shifts or slips between a consideration of the rules, or of play, or of cultural context, with insufficient care and caution. Furthermore, if a pattern is clearly discernable in two of the schema, the resemblance is suggestive of a relationship, but it does not automatically follow that any such link is

straightforward - nor does it follow that it will result in a particular outcome within the remaining schema. To be more specific: to identify patterns within a game's rules is one thing. To point out parallel or analogous patterns within wider culture is fair, and to see this as evidence of a relationship, reasonable. To establish the reasonable possibility of a relationship, however, is not the same as determining its nature. To assume that tropes discernable in either the rules, or the wider cultural context - or both – will necessarily result in a particular repercussion (of whatever kind) at the level of play is problematic.

Civ III is a turn-based strategy game. The player establishes a settlement that with luck, skill, diplomacy, mercantile savvy, technical attainment and military guile will expand to thrive for six thousand years - or for as long as acquisitive, game-generated, neighbouring nations can be bribed, befriended or outgunned. The player begins each game by selecting from an array of non-contemporary leaders (Catherine the Great, Hiawatha, Cleopatra, etc.), and options relating to the tailoring of a game-world: climate, geology, number and aggression of other inhabitants. Each selection involves ramifications. Choosing a small planet, for instance, will result in a short, intense game. There are six difficulty levels, and the opportunity to exclude various victory conditions. Each of the leaders is attached to a particular tribe (Russia, Iroquois, Egyptian, etc.) that begins with different 'starting advances' and that will go on to develop a special military unit (Cossack, mounted warrior or war chariot, for instance).

When game-play begins only a small area in the first settlement's vicinity is exposed on-screen. Exploration reveals more of the terrain, including the location of various resources and luxuries. As well as exploring the game world, the player needs to move through a range of screens where information of strategic importance is accessed and manipulated. There are six screens that relate to government and development. Each has a lightly characterised advisor who can be consulted on trade, domestic or military issues, or international relations. The science advisor is linked to the game's 'technology tree' – a flowchart of scientific research projects. The level of taxes set, raised and invested by the player decides the rate of technological advancement. By accumulating technology, the civilization is able to produce more advanced military units, and build a greater variety of facilities, from libraries to aqueducts, each of which involves quantified advantages (such as increased research or population) as well as costs. Players, if they care to, may investigate the relative advantages of each unit in the game's manual, or by 'right clicking' on the relevant icon in a city's 'construction box', or by checking the on-screen Civlopedia. New technologies also allow the player to undertake the construction of 'Great Wonders'. These involve a major investment of time and resources, but will generate considerable game-play advantages. They are singular, in that if one civilization possesses the Great Wall (a defensive advantage) or the Great Library (a technological advantage) it precludes the competition from building it.

As play proceeds the game offers a wider variety of components and units. The player is likely to continue to seek to establish (or invade) additional cities, while managing and trading resources and directing city improvements. Players can actualise the game's potentials in a variety of ways. There are various trajectories to victory. Some goals could be described as diegetic because they are consistent with the represented world in that they involve diplomatic, cultural or military superiority over the AI competition². Other goals would include the accumulation of points for the sake of a high score.

As this suggests, in *Civ III* the player attends and responds to an array of prompts, each of which is cased in varying degrees of guise: from teeth-gnashing rebel citizens, disgruntled advisers and patronising allies, to blunt instructions such as 'press the space bar'. The player's components (worker, swordsman, tank) are mobile, and the player also moves: between menus

and between the various demands and invitations of the game. The player's cities are viewed from an isometric, top-down perspective, yet it does not follow that the player's proximity is fixed. Distance, in this instance, is not determined solely by the visual because proximity relates to detail, and involves the stratification of information. The player's civilization is made up of different cities, each of which can be peeled like an onion to reveal more, and yet more variables relating to management, resources and production. A player might be oblivious to some of these details, choose to ignore them by implementing default options, or delegate particular responsibilities to the 'city governor'. Thus the extent to which a player grapples with detail and complexity remains a matter of taste and proficiency. A player might also move between different attentive states, in that he or she could adopt a relatively distanced, calculating stance one minute, only to become engrossed pondering the movements of tiny, animated war elephants the next. The game is highly re-playable, so players are also mobile in the sense that over time their competency will increase. As an outcome, one layer of the game will become familiar, automatic, in which case the player might choose to re-incorporate novelty and challenge by playing at a higher difficulty level. While in theory it is possible to split the ludic aspects of the game (those parts of the game - including rules, goals, chance, components, and winning or losing outcomes - that make it a game) from its representational aspects (the portrayal of the game world and its inhabitants), the emergence of the game, through play, involves a weaving together of these facets.

Civ Under Siege

In 'Becoming-state; The bio-cultural imperialism of *Sid Meier's Civilization*', Poblocki points out that the game wears a veneer of equity, in that the player may select his or her leader from a range of backgrounds (including Iroquois, Chinese, Hittite, Russian and Mayan), any of whom might achieve world domination if they clamber up the technology tree first. Yet this, Poblocki writes, only means that they have 'equal opportunity to become the United States of America' (2002: 168). Poblocki suspects that the cultural and historical bias embedded in the game's rules and goals mean that 'we can write anything we want as long as it is the master narrative of globalization' (p 175). Elsewhere other authors have expressed similar concerns in relation to the invisible assumptions that underpin real-world governmental policy simulations (Starr 1999). Such concerns are justified, yet in all likelihood policy makers, sociologists and civil servants looking to scientific simulations for evidence and players enjoying games (with 'made-up' rules and fictional geography where they play the role of a leader who lives for 6000 years) will differ in what they are looking for, and how they are likely to interpret and apply what they find. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) make a related point when they contrast an online game with an online medical database. The use of the database involves goals that are extrinsic, whereas playing the game is 'an end in itself' (2004: 332), its goals are intrinsic – the 'game is not a tool being used to fill an external, utilitarian need' (*ibid*)³.

Poblocki discusses *Civilization* as a history simulation. The problem, he writes, is that 'basing computer simulation on nineteenth-century models of natural history is not adequate to explore contingencies of human history, but instead in a quasi-scientific fashion in fact reinforces the well established narratives of cultural imperialism' (2002:174). The reinforcement Poblocki mentions is an effect on the player, who, through his or her identification with the power offered by the role of leader, internalises the rules of the game, because 'a critical distance to a process one is part of is difficult to assume' (p.175). In this process the player gulps down the logics of American imperialism, which, Poblocki speculates, could influence how the player-subject then orientates him or herself 'towards the current ideological rhetorics and policies of the United States' (2002:174)

Positioning *Civilization* as a simulation or as a game might seem moot – given that it is a game that incorporates a simulation, but in the context of this discussion the distinction is important. Simulation games (such as *The Sims* or *Sim City*) have made life difficult for theorists attempting to define games, precisely because they do not rely on goals and winning or losing outcomes (Juul 2003:33, Salen and Zimmerman 2004:82). Strategy games like those in the *Civilization* series, on the other hand, present the player with clear goals (and sub-goals), each of which relates to and recalls the games' rules, conditionality and constraints. A simulation game involves the pleasures of playful experimentation with the simplified model of a system, more or less for its own sake. If analysing rules (or the effects of rules on players), then the presence or absence of overt goals and winning or losing outcomes is of import - because they play a part in determining the player's relationship to a game's rules (and thus to any power or ideology embedded in those rules). Subsequently, in this instance, the conflating of the genres is problematic.

This is not to say that questions of simulation are irrelevant to *Civ III*. The point is that simulation-orientated play and more goal-orientated play are simultaneously on offer, and each invites a particular style of participation. These two modes of play recall the distinction made by Caillois between *paidea* and *ludus* (cited by Eskelinen 2001, Frasca 1999, 2003). The difference between *paidea* and *ludus*, is 'similar to the distinction between play and game' (Eskelinen 2001), while for Gonzalo Frasca (2003) the 'difference between *paidea* and *ludus* is that the latter incorporates rules that define a winner and a loser, while the former does not'. When the user is playfully experimenting with the system, running around for the sake of exploration, or pursuing alternative, self-initiated goals (getting their roads to form a pattern, for example) they could be said to be leaning towards the *paideic* potentials of the game. When players focus more specifically on competition, goal attainment and strategic progression, they are drawing more intently on the game's ludic facets. If asserting, as Poblocki has done, that the player's relationship to the patterns embedded in the rules has ramifications (on the meaning of the game, and of the effect of any such meaning on the player) then it is expedient, yet ultimately misrepresentative, to overlook the diversity of the game's offers and the scope for the player to exercise her or his prerogative.

David Myers has taken issue with readings of *Civ*, including Poblocki's, that interpret the game's meaning according to external frameworks. For his forthcoming article, 'Bombs, barbarians and backstories: Meaning-making within *Sid Meier's Civilization*', Myers has scoured the online discussions between expert *Civ* players. There he found evidence that for these experienced users there is little or no link between the various in-game variables (be it barbarians, nuclear weapons, character ethnicity or despotism) and the real world instances of these phenomena. He writes that the 'most frequently discussed aspects of the game within dedicated player forums (e.g., Apolyton.net) are the relationships among in-game signifieds – without reference to or really any concern about their significance (or signification) outside the game context' (Myers, in press).

For these experts, argues Myers, the game's components and units only matter in terms of their ludic attributes: the function they have within the game's economy. Such players operate with the representational equivalent of X-Ray specs, cutting through the cosmetic wrapping of the game (such as the depicted landscape, or characterisation). Objects and actions - their value, status and meaning - are read solely in terms of their role and strategic value within the closed world of the game. The meaning of a Celtic swordsman, for example, does not hinge on his bold, bare-chested sprinting and sword brandishing, or his floppy mop of ginger hair, or his race and gender. The swordsman's meaning would relate to its capability as a defensive or an attack unit,

the number of squares per turn that it can travel, and the amount of resources involved in its construction and maintenance.

It is certainly true that players discussing *Civ III* might use language that is only intelligible to those familiar with the game, as this quote from a player suggests:

This is an interesting scenario. I'm playing on Emperor level. I'm so behind that my only hope is to stay at war - so all the people have turned into entertainers and everyone is starving to death. It's switched to anarchy by itself so I'm going to go communist for a while then go back to democracy - which is ok, because I'm religious. (Player P, comment during play to the author)

At one level this player's remarks support Myers' argument. The comment about being religious, for instance, is not an affirmation of the player's faith, but a reference to the element of his civilization's identity that will determine the number of turns involved in a change of government⁴. Yet having observed this player at length I know that a proportion of his game-play does not involve the manipulation of components based purely on their meaning as determined by their ludic value. On the contrary, his gaming involves 'on-the-fly' interpretations that knit in-game and extra-gamic information together in a manner that is idiosyncratic, piecemeal and inconsistent (or playful, in other words). Some information is learnt during the course of play, other information might be deliberately sought out (in the manual, for instance). Obviously a player can only interpret a component in terms of its ludic attributes if they are known - if curiosity or strategic necessity has previously motivated the player to research (and remember) the relevant information. Given this, and the sheer volume of variables in the game, it is only to be expected that the comparative advantages posed by the attributes of certain nationalities (seafaring versus agricultural, for example), or the benefits provided by a particular 'Great Wonder' might remain uninvestigated. In such cases, the assessment of a variable might be informed by personal, extra-gamic connotations or associations – the upshot is that a player might remain disinterested by a particular Great Wonder or combat unit simply because it is felt to be a bit 'boring' or 'useless'.

These comments from players give some indication of just how differently individuals might approach the challenges posed by *Civ III*. The second player (Player L) has been playing the game over a longer period, yet the first (Player W) attains notably higher scores. The first player peers straight past the representational aspects of the game to efficiently milk the system for points, while the second takes pleasure in less quantified goals:

Player W: Scored over 6000 the other day in CIV III. Now trying deity level. ouch.

Player P: Bloody hell! - how did you manage that?

Player W: I gradually conquered all of the [the neighboring civilizations] and then, in the end, I left one tiny village in the desert and surrounded it. This leaves time to research all the technologies and maybe even add some future tech, build temples and cathedrals everywhere to make all happy, turn all mines into irrigation to maximise growth, build mass transit everywhere to reduce pollution, and so on. (Player W and P, email correspondence 21.4.04)

I enjoy running around opening up the dark areas in search of huts and opponents, so I can quickly get an advantage over my opponents in term of knowledge so that I can build the wonders of the world first. I don't care about reaching space age...I'm not too fussed about getting on the scoreboard. In terms of strategy, I don't think I have much of one, apart from opening up areas, getting the huts and building more cities. Initially, I

chose (a leader) randomly, wasn't too fussed. (Now) I play the Aztec characters, because they have a jaguar unit...you don't have to use too much resources to make them...the pictures of the 'leaders' are not that pretty to look at anyway and you can't change their features (Player L, interview 9.3.05)

Such diversity suggests that Myers' evidence reflects the context from which it was extracted. The material that he collected from online *Civ* discussion forums is produced by a particular community of committed players, or fans, who are motivated to participate within a collaborative secondary realisation of the game (in that their solo gaming becomes a shared experience, after the fact), and this results in a certain homogeneity of interpretation. As Henry Jenkins has shown, fandom involves a particular 'mode of reception' as well as 'a particular set of critical and interpretive practices' (1992: 277-278). Still, Myers' argument derails simplistic conclusions concerning the links between objects inside and outside the 'magic circle' of the game⁵ (Johan Huizinga, cited by Salen and Zimmerman, 2003:15). He also points out that the expert's perceptions of the game's components and configurations may differ from that of the newer user:

it is only during initial and novice play – which is most compatible with a linear reading of the game as text – that Civilization game signs and symbols (i.e. game *signifiers*) might be reasonably associated with those pre-existing – often normative – values corresponding to the use (or misuse) of real-world factories, fossil fuels, and nuclear energies (i.e., real-world *signifieds*) (Myers, in press, emphasis in original)

Myers draws on the online communications of experienced *Civ* players to argue that the values accorded to in-game objects or phenomena bear little or no direct relationship to their real-world counterparts, and for this reason, Sybille Lammes paper 'On the border: Pleasure of exploration and colonial mastery in *Civilization III Play the World*' makes for an interesting comparison. Like Poblocki, Lammes (2003) is concerned with the ideology of the *Civ* series, particularly its construction of categories such as culture or barbarism, and the question of whether playing with these dynamics involves the subversion or merely the reaffirmation of colonialist tropes.

As noted, the first stage in playing a game of *Civ III* involves wading through a set of options relating to the size of planet that the player would prefer: the land masses (continents, islands or archipelagos), the geology and climate, the presence or absence of indigenous inhabitants (of varying degrees of ferocity), the amount, identity and aggression levels of the other civilizations on the planet, and the identity of the player's own civilization. Lammes works her way through these opening menus while drawing attention to her inexperience - 'I cannot fathom the consequences of these qualities yet and have to concentrate on choosing from all the options on screen' (2003: 124). Unlike Lammes, a veteran user would be in a position to contextualise the various options faced during this initial 'set up' phase. Lammes documents her decision to play a particular mode of the game ('Capture the Princess') – without describing what this entails, beyond the probable inclusion of a princess, 'I am curious about the function of the princess amidst all these rules and choose for that option' (2003: 124). While she later describes the appearance of the princess component, Lammes still omits a description of its ludic function: 'I can now see the princess again...I try to move her as well. This does not prompt her to shift however. It only activates her to give off a giggling sound.' (2003: 125).

As a new player Lammes is attentive to the representational aspects of the game – the cut-scenes, the princess's giggles. The rules of the game, however, remain largely a mystery. Lammes' inexperience with *Civ III* is not in itself a problem. What is absent, perhaps, is a clear acknowledgement that the analyst's novice status situates and shapes her interpretation. I

concur with Myers that a user's level of experience informs the likelihood of his or her drawing on internal or external referents while making sense of *Civilization*. However, I would stress that the point is not that either the novice or the expert is more 'right' about the meaning of *Civ*. The crucial issue is that the user's level of experience (which will alter as a consequence of play) will constitute the interpretive frame for that user. Furthermore, this shows that the meaning of *Civilization* - whatever it might be - is neither universal, nor static.

Western entertainment, art and literature are rife with instances of chauvinistic marginalisation, and biased simplifications of history. It is possible to locate such dynamics in the rules of *Civilization*, as Lammes, Poblocki and others, including Douglas, have done. Yet it is one thing to show that *Civ* accommodates these patterns as rules, and another to conclude that it follows that *Civ* propagates these patterns as ideology or effect (as in 'an effect of play on the player'). If a novice and an expert 'read' the princess and the barbarian in an entirely disparate way, then the meanings of the game are clearly not constant. Objects, actions and outcomes within *Civ* will mean one thing to beginners and another to experts: meaning shifts, depending on the user, and users alter as well.

In *Civilization*, writes Poblocki, 'power is almost invisible because, at least at the level of rhetoric, it belongs to us' (2002:175). Poblocki is concerned that because of interactivity the politics embedded in the game are more likely to impress themselves on the player – that the player's collaboration with the text's values (expressed as rules) leads to the internalisation of these values by the user. Douglas is also concerned about the capacity of games to instil or 'rehearse' ideology (2002: 14). He writes that while 'some might find the game's recognition of historical contingency progressive and liberating, I would argue that its ultimate effect is to reinforce the pattern of interaction between the colonizing power and the aboriginal' (2002:15). Again, in this instance, the revealed meaning of the game is posed as an effect on the player; where the player-subject's values are at stake. Douglas suggests that 'games may work on their operators to configure our expectations of the real, our sense of history, national identity, race and gender, or economic justice, not just in terms of representation, but in the way that rules teach universal laws and routine behaviour' (2002: 16). By opposing nature to culture, and civilized to indigenous, writes Douglas, *Civ* reiterates the myth of *terra nullius* – the fantasy that until the arrival of Europeans, the 'new world' was legally vacant.

As with Poblocki's, much of Douglas' argument looks in to the rules of the game, and out to wider culture (philosophies of history, postcolonial theory), but when it comes to considerations of meaning there is a move from these schema, to that of play. It is as if the internalisation, reinforcement and reconfiguration linked in their analysis with meaning, is something that happens *to* the player through exposure (like a form of radioactivity). In moving from a critique of the game's rules and the prejudicial bias that they house, to the continuity of such myths within Western popular culture, and then to statements about the effect of the game on its users, these discussions stray across Salen and Zimmerman's three schema: evidence tends to be collected from two schemas (rules, culture), yet conclusions are drawn in a third (play). The trouble with such critique is that play is the schema of the experiential, and it involves the actualisation, interpretation and configuration of the game in real-time by users. As soon as play enters the equation, the assertion that barbarians, for instance, necessarily mean anything specific begins to disintegrate – not least because a player loading a new game can simply choose to omit barbarians from the scenario. Players look to the game, experience the game, and interpret the game, in a multitude of ways.

The relationship between rule and play is complex, and its innumerable and varied ingredients will impact on the (eventual) production of meaning by individual players. Constituents of this

relationship would include the multiplicity of offers featured by the game-as-text, and the scope of the player's maneuverability in relation to these. Also to be considered would be the player's continual motion through the game world, around the various menus, and towards greater competence and familiarity. Sliding further along the continuum between rule and play would involve, eventually, confronting the subjectivity of an individual user. This would seem to be the most likely site for the production of meaning, and it is also the point at which the contexts of play (environmental and social) would become an issue, and the influence of the broadest schema - that of culture - would inevitably become a factor. I would argue that this means that a discussion of the meaning of *Civilization* cannot, on the one hand, position meaning as an effect of play, while at the same time fail to note that play is expressive, and that the realization of the game's myriad offers during play involves selectivity on the part of the user. The player's own (complex and culturally situated) subjectivity is a variable within the system through which the meaning of a game is produced.

From literature to comics, from horror movies to militaristic FPS games, it is not difficult to find examples of Western texts that feature cultural or political bias. Yet it is one thing to identify such patterns within the structure of a text - and another to conclude that this is what that text *means* to its audience. That would entail making assumptions about who is watching (or reading, or playing). As active reader theorists, cultural philosophers and media studies pundits have long argued, describing the structure or the production of a text is different from describing its reception and interpretation. In addition to which, it has not been demonstrated that games are more likely to impress a particular perspective on their users due to interactivity or agency. The opposite could just as convincingly be argued: that because of play, interactivity and agency, the 'reading position' of the player is more multiple and contesting, more critical and assertive, than that offered to viewers, gazers or readers. The second proposition is more theoretically feasible, but that does not make it any easier to prove.

My emphasis on the provisional and shifting nature of meaning in *Civ III* is informed by my own gaming preferences. I have played *Civ* games regularly for a couple of years, but I am not a high scorer. When I want to rule the planet I play on an easy setting. When my goal is mere survival, I play at a much higher difficulty level. At times I focus on the manipulation of components according to their ludic value, yet at other times I take the flattery or unfriendly actions of the game's AI characters personally. I will often start a new game only to abandon the new world if it is missing iron, or if it is too dry, too swampy, or too light on luxuries such as silks, gems or incense. I associate fresh water and green land with wealth, and I think ocean travel is boring. I like the detailing in the tiny animated figures. I think Medieval Infantry units are useless, whatever their official attack rating is - although I know they only appear feeble because I keep sending them into combat with insufficient defensive support. Discovering each world feels like unwrapping a present or rifling through a toy box, and if I don't get what I want, I can toss the world away and generate another. I never play online, or contribute to *Civ* fan sites. Generally we (my partner and myself) play out the same scenario in parallel, taking turns on the computer, and comparing the two worlds that emerge. In the immediate context of play (our house) the game itself is regularly accused of cheating and 'travelling in time' (reloading at an earlier save point to thwart the AI neighbours) is our preferred way to 'cheat back'. While I have played to completion and won, I frequently lose, and I am much more likely to abandon a game, or repeat a single scenario several times, than play it through to a particular conclusion. My point is that *Civ III* is a game, and games are played. We do need to investigate problematic myths, values and assumptions in computer games - but when undertaking this work, we cannot ignore the nature of play.

Conclusion

Some of the dissatisfaction expressed by critics of *Civilization* seems founded in disappointment. The rhetorical subtext of their analysis is that play should be edifying. *Civilization* is not edifying – and so it must be corrupting. It is self-evident that *Civ III* involves a dog-eat-dog vision of history, and that this aspect of the game is reflected in its rules. It is true, also, that the game reflects its particular cultural, commercial and historical roots. However, if meaning is associated with reception and interpretation, then a significant portion of the meaning of *Civ III* is generated by or emerges through play.

This discussion is not intended, in any way, to be a reiteration of arguments on the limits of textual analysis. On the contrary, the analysis discussed in this chapter demonstrates the need for textual analysis. We need a better understanding of the multiple connotative fields and codes that are a part of a game's rules, representational agenda and inter-textual reach. Textual analysis, however, needs to embrace (rather than shun) the complexity and multiplicity of offers, invitations and demands accommodated and communicated by games.

The meaning of a game does not reside in 'one place', but once an analyst has decided, for the sake of a particular discussion, to investigate meaning within the schema of rules, or in play, or in terms of wider culture, that should in turn suggest the theory and the methods that are applicable, and the outcomes that can be realistically or usefully reached. Situating the research question in one schema, the proof and discussion in a second, and the conclusion in a third, without the complexities of each being considered, is not especially helpful.

The historical trajectory modelled by *Civ III* is certainly reductive – but criticising a simulation for being reductive is nonsensical.⁶ Cultural codes and assumptions may well be embedded in the selective inclusions and omissions that constitute a simulation (or a model, or a representation), but these need to be considered alongside game design processes and marketing, and not in isolation. By describing meaning as an effect (an ill-effect, or side-effect) of play some critics, despite their having a progressive agenda, risk inadvertently painting themselves into a reactionary corner. Like many popular texts before it, the *Civilization* games feature Western chauvinism, as Poblocki, Lammes and Douglas have argued. What is more difficult is proving that this continuity reveals anything other than that these fantasies are persistent (which is not a trivial point). The game, at least at the level of its rules, proposes that history is linear; that nations are culturally homogenous, that technical progression coupled with democracy leads to happy and productive civilian populations, and that the value of land resides in its yield and usability. The question is whether the meaning of *Civilization III* is limited to this; whether this fully accounts for the meanings of a game that captivates its players through the variability of its emergent play, and the sheer volume of information that is on offer.

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NOTES

¹ The main subject of this paper is *Sid Meier's Civilization III*, or *Civ III* (released in 2001, developed by Firaxis Games, published by Infogrames) and its various expansion packs. Here, when it is expedient, and where distinctions between the games are not an issue, the title *Civilization* or *Civ* is used to refer to the game series as a whole, from *Sid Meier's Civilization* (released in 1991, developed and published by

MicroProse Software Inc) onwards. Of course in the contexts of a different discussion, distinguishing between the various games may be necessary.

The game can be multi-played, but here it is considered in its offline solo-player incarnation.

² AI, or Artificial Intelligence, in this instance simply means that the other civilizations in the game are aspects of its programming, and not the avatars of other human players.

³ Kurt Squire has used the game as an education tool. In order to use the game in the history classroom with any success it was necessary first to create particular 'episodes' or mods, and then to ensure that gaming sessions were bracketed by teaching that enabled students to critically frame the proceedings. (Jenkins and Squire 2003)

⁴ In a later conversation on *Civ III*, religion and anarchy it transpired that Player P thought that the game was suggesting that a religious population adjusted faster to changes in government because of 'faith grants the population strength or resilience', whereas Player D (the author) had always thought the game was saying that a religious population is more biddable or docile.

⁵ Whatever the resemblances or overlaps between being inside or outside of a game, there are still things that will set the game apart. Consent, for instance, is so fundamental to our playing a game, that without consent, it would not be play, or a game (however 'real' it looked). The presence of consent means that if we know it is a game, the meaning (of gestures, acts, signs, objects) will be irrevocably 'different'.

⁶ That would be like disparaging a map for not being life-size.